16:23

The Humanist Pulpit

Series IX Number 9

Must We Believe in Immortality?

JOHN H. DIETRICH

Price Ten Cents

The First Unitarian Society,
803 LaSalle Avenue,
Minneapolis, Minn.

I

This idea of immortality is one that has played a vital part in man's thinking almost from the beginning of time. Mankind always and everywhere, with few and scattered exceptions, has dreamed of immortality, has insisted that under one form or another he shall not die, cannot die. The form of this belief is often crude, fantastic, grotesque, sometimes so uncouth as to be revolting, sometimes so attentuated as to be hardly recognizable; still the apprehension is present. Practically everywhere, until recently, men have looked upon death, not as the end of life, but merely as the beginning of life in some other form. This belief, as suggested by Herbert Spencer, no doubt grew out of man's early experience with dreams, which in his ignorant state convinced him that a man consisted of two parts—the soul and the body—and that the soul, which was his real life, had merely a temporary connection with the body which it inhabited for a time, just as a man lives in a house and is free to come and go. I need comment no further on this conception of the soul, because only three weeks ago I delivered an address on the subject "Has Man a Soul?" in which I covered this problem in its various phases. All that is necessary to say at this time is that men believed that this soul came from God and at the moment of death returned to the divine spirit from which it came, and that there it continued to live in one form or another throughout eternity.

And with this universally accepted theory of the soul, which was separate from the body and which was the real personality, and which continued to live forever, different religions built up their different theories of immortality and outlined in very concrete and definite form the kind of life which this soul was supposed to live. But probably no religion has been more serious and definite and concrete in its treatment of this afterlife of the soul than Christianity. And this was perfectly natural, because it was supposed that while this soul inhabited the body here on earth, but a few years at most, it continued to exist in this other form for millions and millions of years, aye, for eternity. And so the Christian church taught man to neglect this short and temporary existence here on earth in the interest of the prolonged and eternal existence after death. This earthly life was looked upon merely as an ante-chamber in which souls waited to be ushered into the real life of immortality. One was urged not only to disregard this life in the interest of the other, but even to mortify it and be willing to suffer and be unhappy for these few short years in order that he might attain real happiness in the life beyond. In fact Christianity laid so much stress upon this fact of immor-

tality that it developed into what is known as a religion of "other worldliness"; that is, a religion mainly interested in another world than this.

And so Christianity connected up its whole idea of reward and punishment with this future existence, teaching that the soul would receive its just reward or punishment in the after life for the sins which it committed while it inhabited this earthly body. And in accordance with this, it taught that there were two places of spiritual abode: one place called heaven, where lived in eternal bliss those souls whose good deeds during their earthly sojourn outbalanced their evil deeds; another place called hell, where the evil souls continued to exist in eternal torment; and the clergy vied with one another in portraying in vivid colors the delights of the former place and the horrors of the latter. And thus heaven became such a desirable place and hell such a lurid reality that the whole object of human life here on earth, according to Christianity, is to escape the one and attain the other. In fact, Christianity teaches that our life here under the blue sky for a few years as we live it, is merely a preparation for this greater life, that the period of preparation is ended by death, and that when we have passed that line, gone over from that which is visible here into that which is invisible there, we are either lost or saved and things are definitely fixed forever.

The methods by which one might escape the latter place and enter the former and thus be pleasantly situated throughout eternity are different according to different branches of the church. To the Catholic, salvation has always meant membership in the one true church, reception of the sacraments as evidence of such membership, and in its perfect form, withdrawal from the world of every day affairs. To the Protestant, it has not depended upon action, but upon feeling; not upon outward conformity, but upon inward experience; not upon the offices of the church, but upon the grace of God. In other words, according to the Protestant, salvation from hell and entrance into heaven is to be attained not by outward works but by inward faith in Jesus Christ and in the efficacy of his atonement; that is, faith in the fact that the death of Jesus was a sacrifice offered for our sins. Some of the more liberal forms of Protestantism believe that this salvation is attained neither by affiliation with an institution nor by the exercise of faith in Jesus Christ, but rather by the development of character. But in any case—Catholic, Protestant, Liberal—all have been engaged in ordering this life in such manner as to insure happiness in the hereafter.

This is the great underlying thought of Christianity; and if it be true, the world ought to consecrate itself—its time, its money, its power

—to delivering men from this imminent danger. If it be not true; then it ought to be brushed completely one side, so that we may fix our attention on the true end and aim of life, on what ought to be the goal of human endeavor. I am not going to spend my time this morning in proving to an audience like this how foolish and unreal and silly this whole conception of life is. Remember, I am not speaking now of immortality. I have neither the desire nor the ability to prove or disprove immortality. I am speaking rather of the conception of life held by orthodox Christians, in order that I may contrast it with the conception held by Humanistic Liberals. And I need not prove to you that this whole idea of heaven and hell, one of which we must enter after death, and which one to be determined by the life we live here is in the light of modern knowledge childish and ridiculous.

And yet so long as the world believes this, so long as the one end and aim of human life, as held up to people, is to be saved for some future existence—think of the waste of time, of anxiety, of prayers, of consecrations, of wealth, of intellectual force—the whole power of the world expended on a false issue, turned into wrong channels. The whole orthodox Christian church today is spending its time in trying to propitiate a God who is not angry, to save souls that are not lost, that they may enter a heaven that does not exist. Expending its energies along mistaken channels toward issues that are entirely imaginary! Think, for example, if during the last 2,000 years all the time and the money, all the intelligence and the consecration could have been spent on those things that would have really helped men to find out the meaning of life, and to illustrate that meaning in earnest living, how much richer life might be today. If all the money that has been spent on the cathedrals, on the monasteries, spent in supporting hordes and hordes of priests, spent in all the endeavor to save men in a future life—if all this had been used in educating men, and training them into a comprehension of what kind of beings they really are, what kind of a world this is in which they are forced to live; spent in training them into mastery of themselves; spent in teaching them how to understand and control the forces of nature—think what a civilization might have been developed here on this poor old planet by this time! How much of the disease, how much of the corruption, how much of the ignorance, how much of the cruelty, how much of the unkindness, how much of all that still remains in us of the animal might have been outgrown, sloughed off, put beneath our feet! One of the most pathetic things in the world today is that so many thousands, so many millions of people are consecrating their time, their energy, their

money in the attempt to do that which does not need to be done; while they have no interest whatever in many things which need very much to be done.

II

Now in contrast to this the Humanist regards this whole idea of immortality as purely speculative and beyond the reach of man's knowledge; and, therefore, as in the case of the idea of God, it assumes a position, if not of complete agnosticism, at least of complete neutrality —that is a position in which the future life is neither dogmatically affirmed nor dogmatically denied. The religion of Humanism, as I have frequently informed you, is based upon science and uses the scientific method in its attempt to understand every problem, and science is never dogmatic. So long as a thing has not been scientifically demonstrated to be true or untrue, science maintains an open mind. And so the followers of Humanism maintain an open mind toward this question of personal survival after death.

This is the point from which Humanism approaches this problem. It frankly accepts it as an unsolved problem, still open to the widest variety of understanding. It has no solution of its own to offer. Properly speaking, there is no such thing as a doctrine of the future life in the religion of Humanism. It is not one of the subjects on which the mind of a Humanist is inclined to dwell. This disinclination comes mostly from a reaction against the undue prominence which has been given to it by Christianity, and the dire results of such prominence. The Humanist realizes that to the extent that men's minds have been centered upon a life to come, just to that extent they have neglected the life here, and it is the life here with which Humanism is concerned, for Humanism looks upon the life here as an end in itself and not as a preparation for some other life which we know nothing about. For instance, when a foreigner comes to America to remain only until he has saved enough money to return to his own country and live in comfort, he cannot become very much interested in this country or very sincerely attached to its institutions. He will remain a foreigner during all the years he spends here, and America will occupy second place in his affections. In the same way, when we look forward to a world beyond as our permanent home and are always preparing to migrate to it, we are apt to care less and less for this world. The Christians are always talking about the next world, and emphasizing the belief that they are temporary visitors on

this planet. "I am a pilgrim. I am a stranger and I can tarry but a night," is one of their favorite hymns. "I am but a stranger here, heaven is my home" is another. "Love not the things of this world" and "We have no abiding city here" are favorite texts of the Christian pulpit. No wonder that during the Middle Ages when faith in the next world was very much stronger than it is today, ignorance, disease, poverty and misery played havoc with this world.

Now the Humanist, not knowing anything about another world and not caring to speculate about it, devotes all of his time to the service of the world in which he lives. He views life here on earth as something worth while in itself, and believes, therefore, that the end and object of life is to develop ourselves, both individually and socially, to the utmost. The end of life is to learn to know and take possession of our inheritance —this earth—and control all its forces for the service of civilization. It is to rejoice in all this self-development, in all this knowledge, in all this power. It is to feel ourselves thrilling with the consciousness that we are parts of the great organism of humanity, and that we are co-operating with it in bringing about the grand result of the ages—a condition in which all men and women shall live in peace and in plenty, in justice and in good will.

Oh, that the time and money and energy employed to preach and prove another world had been devoted to making this one habitable, clean, and sweet! Instead of trying to get ready to emigrate into some unknown world, we should do our best to make life in this world so beautiful, so exalted, so free, so attractive, as to make the people in the next world, if there is such a world, long to come and live with us. This is the attitude of the religion of Humanism to this problem of personal survival after death, and its consolation lies in this fact—that if there is another life, we cannot possibly miss it if we have made the best of this one; and if there is no other life, we may still have the satisfaction that we have not lost this one by throwing it away for another. The religion of Humanism, therefore, says to every man, to use the words of a great Humanist: "Work while it is day, for the night cometh when no man can work. Work well and wisely, and when your little day is over, go to sleep, calmly accepting with an equal mind whatever fate, if fate there be, that may be in store for you 'behind the veil.' "

III

But Christians object to this theory and argue the worthlessness of life unless we be immortal. Says Dr. Fosdick, "If life is merely a piece of tissue paper, to be crumpled up and tossed into a great discard; if all the hopes, the ideals, the ambitions, the aspirations of men are to be numbed into eternal silence, then life would be 'a brief and discreditable episode on one of the minor planets.' What would be more futile than spending a lifetime building character that is to end at the grave, or sewing diamonds of virtue on tissue paper?" One might as well ask, why spend so much time building beautiful buildings which some day must be torn down; why spend so much time in creating and treasuring the works of art which cannot endure forever; why go to a symphony concert and listen to music for an hour if it cannot last always; why devote all this energy to building up a high type of civilization which will eventually decay; why spend so much time working for and defending even with your life—America. Is America going to live forever? Does the fragrance of a rose lose its sweetness now because its petals at last fade and drop? Endless continuance would not make it more worth while at the time. What is good, is no less good because it does not endure forever. And so those who know nothing of immortality can regard life as invested with unfailing splendor.

For those who love the thought of a vast endurance, there is the further reflection that our lives are not detached isolated things, but are in touch with and a part of an eternal grandeur which animates the life of all mankind; namely, the spirit of human goodness or the moral order. To its presence the deeds of all peoples bear lasting witness. They have given it various names—spirit, conscience, presence of God, moral order. Call it by what name you will, it is there at the heart of the noblest human life. It is that thing which inspires men to lay down their lives for truth, for country, for release of the downtrodden, for the uplift of the sorrowing. It is the thing which fills men and women with restlessness in the presence of poverty and crime and war. It is that which makes men discontented with present achievement. Why is it that men do not simply fold their hands and turn away from the sight and sound of the world's wrong? Because there is an innate stirring within which forbids such disloyalty. And this is what we mean by the moral order. There is a world of things which we can see and handle, the world of trees and stones and bodies; but there is also this other world made up of acts of heroism, of high longings, of shame at the thought of evil, of

endless effort after something better. It is a world which existed long before we were born, and which will continue long after we have closed our eyes. But we are part of it now; we are members of it by virtue of every noble act. Every time we choose the way of courage rather than cowardice, the way of justice rather than injustice, the way of good will rather than hatred, we show that we are but a fragment of that eternal and universal groping after better things.

IV

Now what are the practical consequences of this kind of thinking? There are two questions raised constantly which I wish to discuss very briefly. We are told in the first place that if it were ever proved that man is not immortal, he would at once give up all forms of useful activity and surrender himself to idleness and ease; and especially would he abandon at once those eternal quests which constitute the glory of existence. Knowing that he had but a few years to live, man would not bother to acquire knowledge; knowing that all would be over soon, he would not paint pictures, carve statues, or compose music; and knowing that this world was ultimately to be destroyed, he would not bother to perpetuate his ideals in the form of social institutions. The work of life would not be as it is now, the quest of distant goals and the fight for forlorn hopes. It would become at best a mere matter of routine—a search for a fair amount of decent comfort in the few troubled years of our earthly pilgrimage.

Now this is a piece of logic which sounds plausible, but which I believe is absolutely false. Think of the matter in respect to your own life, just as I am now thinking of my own. If I were told that I am going to die at the end of five years, would this discovery make any great difference in the character of my living? Would I stop reading books or looking at pictures or listening to music because in the brief space of five years I should be able to learn little more about these things? Would I abandon my labors here with the Unitarian Society just because my time was limited to five years rather than twenty-five? Of course, one cannot tell definitely what he would do, but I am practically assured that I should go right on with my present work and manner of living just as I do now without any thought of the future.

And I believe men would do the same if it were proved to them that immortality was a dream pure and simple. What difference would it make? I would still be interested in truth and would find all I could

of it in so short a space of time. I would still love the beautiful and would see all I could of it while life lasted. I would still believe in goodness, and do everything I could to bring it to the hearts of men during the remaining years. Why should I, just because there is no future life, do the things I do not like to do, and refrain from doing the things I do like to do? The things are of the same value whether they last ten years or ten centuries or an eternity. And this we find to be true among men who cherish no expectations in regard to a future life. Here, for instance, is Professor Ostwald, the great scientist. In his little book on immortality, he tells us frankly that he does not believe in a life beyond the grave, and what is more, that he has no desire for such a life. The only disagreeable thing connected with the fact of extinction, he says, is that "there are still many things which I should like to do or to experience before I die." And in order that these things undone and inexperienced may be as few as possible, he lived one of the busiest lives that the world has ever seen. And so it seems to me that in this respect whatever difference there might be would be to stimulate man to increased endeavor just because the days for work are short.

And in the second place, they tell us that man would not only forsake his ideals and give himself over to ease and luxury, but he would forthwith abandon his moral principles and give himself up to riotous living. If this life were all, then men would strive to get as much out of life as possible in the form of food and drink and money and sensual pleasures of every kind. This is the logic of St. Paul when he says, "If the dead rise not, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die"; and this is the logic of the Persian poet in the Rubaiyat when he sings, "Drink for you know not whence you came, nor why; Drink for you know not why you go, nor where." That is the unworthiest argument of all—the claim that unless men are assured of golden harps or black-eyed houris, or at least some kind of future existence, they will convert life into a debauch. It is the grossest libel upon man's reason and moral being that could possibly be uttered. There is no connection whatever between eating and drinking and dying tomorrow. Do you really mean to say that you and I find something worthwhile in life besides the things of the flesh—only because of our faith in the immortality of the soul? I grant that we sometimes behave like beasts, but not because of the thought of life's brevity. Suppose that a man receives word from his physician that he has only a year to live. What will he do? According to this philosophy, he will immediately fill himself with alcohol and surround himself with loose women. With only a year to live, he will get his fill of bestial pleasure. Is that the measure of our manhood? Will all men

respond in that fashion? If Socrates or Savonarola or Martin Luther had been convinced that this life is all, would they at once have abandoned their ideals and surrendered themselves to the swinish task of eating and drinking and making merry?

Even as a speculation, this conclusion is absurd; but fortunately we do not have to rely upon speculation. Thousands of men in the past have lived glorious lives without any hope of a future existence. The ancient Israelites seemed to know nothing of a future life and yet it was this race which produced those prophets of righteousness like Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the rest. The same thing is true of the ancient Stoics of Greece and Rome. Some of them believed in immortality and some did not, but this doctrine had no place whatever in their philosophy. The highest good according to Stoicism was to practice virtue for its own sake, to do your duty because it is your duty, regardless of whether you live or die, now or hereafter. And think of the individual men who have lived at various times and places, with minds devoid of all hope of an immortal life, who have passed their days in loyalty and love, and then have lain down in what they regarded as the last long sleep. Think, for instance, of a man like Thomas Henry Huxley. No man ever lived who was a more shining example of all those qualities which we associate with perfect manhood, and yet never for a moment did the thought of immortality intrude upon his life. And so men are good or bad for reasons which are altogether remote from a belief in immortality. Emerson said, "Beauty is its own excuse for being," and the same thing might be said of goodness. It stands on its own feet, and is not supported by a belief in immortality; and the real man is like the heroic mariner, of whom Seneca tells us in his parable, who, when wrestling with his vessel in a storm, cried out: "O Neptune, thou canst save me if thou wilt, or thou canst drown me. But whether or no, I will hold my rudder true."

And then, too, this philosophy is an outrage upon man's reason as well as his moral nature. Every man with a spark of sense knows that health, whether of body or mind or moral nature, is desirable for its own sake. A man will be careful of his health whether he expects to live again or not. He will avoid headaches and fevers and colds irrespective of his attitude toward the problem of a future life. In the same way, he will continue the culture of the mind irrespective of the thought of immortality. One only needs look into the motives that govern human actions to recover our confidence in the essential soundness of human nature, and in the ability of morality to take care of itself without any

thought of the hereafter. Men are interested in the present, not in the future. They cultivate the mind and care for the body to make life richer here and now. And love is desired because it makes each passing moment a thrill and an ecstacy; and not because we live forever. The fact is that there are excellent people who believe in immortality and equally excellent people who ignore it altogether, from which it would follow that excellence of character is independent of one's speculations about either the eternal past or eternal future.

But, the preacher tells us, a future life is necessary to explain the suffering and injustice in this life. In my humble opinion such a belief has done more to cause the suffering and injustice than anything else. Practically all of the things—poverty, crime, disease, war—that tend to destroy the worth of life are of man's own making; or if not of his making, they at least are due to his lack of effort to abolish them; and such a belief has done more to postpone the reforms of present abuses than anything else. The church has used the doctrine of immortality as an anaesthetic. Throughout the centuries, it has reconciled the poor to poverty, and women to degradation, by the teaching of an eternity of bliss which was to compensate for the evils of the present life. The time to suppress injustice and relieve human suffering is now, and not in some distant future. It is our duty to resist and overcome evils here, and not to run away from them. The long arrest of Christian civilization was due to a resignation on the part of those who could have been the pioneers of better things, because they reconciled themselves to their barbarities by thinking of compensations to come in a life hereafter. This belief has always tempted man to shirk his responsibilities. He has left many things to be done by God which he should have done himself. It is a nobler religion which tells man to do all he can now, and to do it himself.

Again we are told that immortality is necessary lest our efforts be wasted. I can sympathize most with this attitude of mind. We put our best effort, these people say, into the building of fine lives, then comes the closing hour and the futile end of all our efforts. But is this true? Is all the endeavor which we put into the making of a noble life wasted? No, it is not wasted—first, because a good life while it lasts is better than a bad one; and second, because it is saved from annihilation by its effects upon the lives of those who come after. I have treated this subject of immortal influence before and need not go into detail in regard to it this morning. I only suggest that it would be a very interesting thing to trace the consequences here on earth of each act of good that men do

or leave undone. Who can picture the ultimate outcome of a single admirable deed? Think of one for yourself and trace it back and ahead as far as you can with all its ramifications, and see the good here, there, and everywhere that has come as the result of it. Or picture some harmful act, and trace its consequences as far as you can and see the misery left in its train. Think of the eternal effect, therefore, of your every deed in relation with your fellowmen; and then be selfish enough, if you dare, to complain that all your effort has been futile because you cannot live forever.

V

And so Humanism believes that this life is an end in itself and not preparatory to another life after death. It does not affirm or deny immortality; it simply ignores it. It believes that the important thing is not whether or not we continue to live after death, but to lay that degree of stress or lack of stress upon it which nature exacts of us, rather than to put our whole and supreme thought upon the thing itself. We make a mistake in constantly turning our thoughts to a life beyond the grave. Rather let us work here and be strong. The finest utterance I know on this whole subject came from King David in his dying hour to his son. Did he say to him, Think of where I am going? Did he remind him of the futility of life and urge him to think of death and eternity? Did he wish him to remember his father and think of him in heaven? Did he ask him to wait in patience until they should meet again? No, forgetful of himself and of what death might mean to him, he said: "Now I go the way of all earth, therefore, be thou strong and show thyself a man."

The chief difference, therefore, between Humanism and Christianity in regard to this subject is in the degree of definiteness that can be reached. While Christians have formulated their thought and their feeling into precise images of happiness or misery and then ordered this life that the former might be attained and the latter avoided, the Humanist is content to let this subject remain in the region of the unsettled. He feels that nothing definite can be known, and he refuses to give himself up to illusions. Therefore, the doctrine of a future life is one of those in which the Humanist does not take a very acute interest. His respect for human nature, his sense of the harmony of the universe, his conviction of the imperativeness of the moral law, his belief in the worthwhileness of human life—all these combine to fix his attention on this life rather than

on a life after death. Whether there be a future life or not, this life claims us. We are children of this world. It offers us a field of work vast enough for the highest aspirations. Why should men be forever crying for a future heaven, as a child cries for the impossible. There is something unmanly in the insistence that nothing in this world is satisfactory. Whether the grave be the goal or not, life can be made real and earnest. As Matthew Arnold said: "If there be no other life, pitch this one high." The desire for heaven is but the restless longing for a higher and better life. Why should we build on hopes which suggest a postponement of the real growth of the individual? Should not our greatest endeavors be to create heaven here, in the land where our duty lies from day to day? Let us, therefore, seek to grow toward the human perfection of which we dream, and not wait to be transformed into it suddenly at death.

And so the Humanist says "Yea" to life here and now; he cries, "While life remains, live nobly and walk unafraid." Our strength and consolation lies, not in what comes after death, but in loving deeds, in a firmer hold upon values that make life richer, in a deep sense of the preciousness of the opportunity of this life. Waiting for no new accessions of splendor when the line is crossed, we strive to fill life now with all the purer grandeur because of its brevity. Think of life here—its sanctity, its augustness. Use its opportunities to prove the sublime stature which a human life can reach on earth. Let us labor without end for excellence—this it is that makes life worth the living. And when the last minute is struck, to look back over the years and be able to say, "I have at least tried to fill them with the work of a true man or woman"—this will let us close our eyes in peace, this is the consolation of the Humanist.

Let us therefore as an organized body of humanity grasp, cultivate and direct that which we have found to be the real inspiration of human life. Let us formulate a plan for the abandonment of the wasteful and horrible episode of war. Let us draw up a scheme for the abolition of that baneful and corrupting state of poverty. Let us make a science of the life and resources of humanity on this planet; let us organize it as men organize a great business. Let us act as if there were no future life, and the one chance of happiness we have is before the heart ceases to beat. Let us each be apostles of the social spirit until a sound standard of conduct rules the world. Then we can safely dispense with all thought of immortality, for man will have discovered the secret of life,—that he who created in his imagination heaven up there, can create it in reality down here.

It is the custom to publish Mr. Dietrich's addresses in a series of ten numbers during the church year, one address each month being selected for that purpose. Many of these are out of print, but the titles listed below are still available and may be obtained by application in person or by mail to The Publication Committee, 803 La Salle Ave., Minneapolis, at the price of 10 cents per copy.

The Business of a Church in These Days.
The Plan to Outlaw War.
The Human Thanksgiving.
Liberal Religion at the Cross-Roads.
The General Break-up of Christianity.
The Failure of Protestantism.
The Meaning of Modernism.
Science and the Future of Man.
Can Human Nature Be Changed?
Christian Science and New Thought.
Religious Reaction and Fundamentalism.
Humanism—The Next Step in Religion.
The Ethics of Violence.
Orthodox Christianity or Evolution.
The Proofs of Evolution.
What the Bible Really Is.
What and Where Is God?
Has Man a Soul?
The Kind of Salvation Man Needs.
The Problem of Clear Thinking.
Must We Believe in Immortality?